

EXHIBIT 13

Monday, 25 May 2009

Long journey to American dream



Chai Eang (above) and his brother Henry are business partners. Henry lives in Charleston and commutes to Charlotte. Chai lives uptown near their restaurant. DAVIE HINSHAW – dhinshaw@charlotteobserver.com

The Charlotte Observer

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com>

By Victoria Cherrie

Special Correspondent

Posted: Sunday, May. 24, 2009

Chai Eang rinses a few glasses behind the granite bar at Basil Thai Cuisine before sauntering into the softly-lit dining room to greet customers stopping in for dinner.

Each new face and each dish served highlights a dream for Eang, 38, and his brother Henry, 43, who escaped the killing fields of their native Cambodia as boys and grew up to be business partners.

Together, they own Basil Thai and Chai Lounge restaurants in Charleston, and now they've come back to their Charlotte-area roots to open a restaurant on North Church Street uptown.

Sitting in leather chairs parked at marble tables, they are a long way from their family's tiny house in Cambodia, where their parents raised nine boys and girls while operating a noodle restaurant.

They were all working there when armed soldiers flooded the Cambodian city of Tusat in 1975 and yelled for everyone to gather their belongings and "get out" because the Americans were going to drop bombs.

"We pulled whatever we could take, clothes, some rice and necessities for daily life," said another of Chai's brothers, Sa Eang, 53.

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The family loaded a pushcart and joined a massive parade of frightened people, not knowing where they were going or what would happen to them as the Khmer Rouge, under the command of Pol Pot, took control.

They traversed fields of dead bodies and then jungles before being split up by age and forced into different camps, where the older children worked for free and lived off a few tablespoons of rice a day, Chai and Sa said. Chai, who was only about 5, was young enough to stay with his parents, who grew vegetables and worked in communal kitchens.

"We worked 14 hour days, seven days a week," Sa said. "I just remember being so hungry ... so hungry you can't sleep."

The family was liberated when a Vietnamese invasion ended the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1978. But they were later separated when Chai, Henry, Sa and their father, Ta An, migrated with Sa's wife to Thailand without their mother, Kim Ev, and other siblings.

Kim Ev wanted to stay in Cambodia to wait for an older son who had been studying in college in a different city. Weeks later, she learned that he had been murdered by the Khmer Rouge, and she left for the Thai border, but she couldn't catch up to the boys and their father. They were separated for years.

"She had lost all hope," Chai said.

After months in a Thai refugee camp, the Eang brothers were sponsored by a small church group from Rock Hill. The family arrived in 1980 with only their clothes. The congregation at Hopewell Presbyterian Church donated necessities and helped their dad set up a house.

"I still remember that house," Sa said, smiling. "Three bedrooms, two baths and rent – \$175 a month."

Sa went straight to work, in a glass factory, in restaurants and then for the local housing authority while taking night courses. The younger boys, who were in grade school by then, struggled to learn English until Nancy Newton, a school tutor, took them in and made them part of her American family.

"You can't imagine the lessons they've taught us just by being who they are," Newton said.

She and her husband, Joe, began inviting the Eangs to their home in Rock Hill for lunch, then dinner and then holidays.

The Newtons were instrumental in helping the boys have the kind of life that other kids here do, the Eangs said. They were involved in school programs, had opportunities to play sports and had a support system. "I don't know what our lives would have been like without them," Henry said.

After high school, Chai joined the Army and became an infantryman, serving for several years before returning to the area. Henry earned an accounting degree and moved to Atlanta for about 10 years, working in numerous restaurants before returning to Charleston to fulfill his dream of opening his own.

The brothers, who both had worked in restaurants since about the eighth grade, opened Basil Thai Cuisine in Charleston in 2002. They opened Chai's Lounge and Tapas in 2005 and now continue their dream by expanding to Charlotte where, many of their Charleston customers actually live.

"I think what we went through during the Khmer Rouge gave us the will, the drive, to keep going," Henry said. "I mean, every time you think you have it hard, you can look back and be reminded that this really isn't that hard."

Their father died of cancer in 1998 but not before finally reconnecting with their mother and other siblings, whom they found living in Cambodia. She moved here for a while but returned to Cambodia shortly after her husband died.

Henry still lives in Charleston and commutes to Charlotte, where Chai now lives uptown a few blocks from the new restaurant.



“They truly are the American dream,” Newton said. “They came here literally with the clothes on their backs. They worked hard. And I am so proud of who they are.”

Posted by CAAI News Media at 7:29 am

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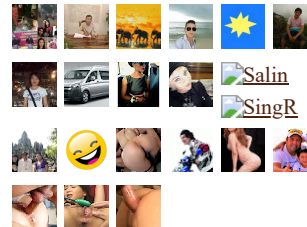
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